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**Creative Strategies for Implementing Postmodernism  
Thinking for University Administrators to Improve Colleges  
and Universities in the United States**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines postmodernism and higher education by presenting several postmodernism authors' ideas that provide a framework for discussions for much of the literature on postmodernism. The postmodern perspective offer concepts, insights, and ways of viewing our current situation, using vocabulary that illuminates profound changes confronting universities and colleges and their place in the postmodern society. The article is concern with the usefulness of post-modernity for illuminating change in higher education associated with the new millennium. The postmodern condition has implications for the nature and professionalism of teaching. The work of teachers is already changing, owing to dramatic changes in the world in which they work. This essay attempts to identify the impact of postmodernism on the concept and practice of teaching, especially in higher education.

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## **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to discuss the impact of postmodernism on the concept and practice of teaching, especially at the level of higher education. In addition, the essay will address the development of creative strategies for implementing postmodern thinking for university administrators to improve colleges and universities in the United States.

## **Modernist Explanations are Inadequate**

Despite the widespread disapproval of postmodernism and its protagonists, a large number contingent of social theorists who disclaim identification as postmodernist nevertheless conclude that conventional modernist explanation are inadequate to explain the extraordinary and rapid changes taking place in the society. For a social theory perspective that was assumed to be a passing fad, postmodernism, has remarkable staying power. While spawning a range of new and exciting ideas, postmodernism have generated heated academic controversies that have lasted for decades. A major arena for postmodern intellectual warfare occurred in institutions of higher education, for higher education is a modern institution, albeit infused with both pre-modern and postmodern characteristics.

Most professors who populate colleges and universities are products of and ardent purveyors of modernism. Postmodernist academics interrogate higher education in almost every aspect of its existence: from its allegedly arbitrary professorial hierarchies, to its deification of science and scientific methods, to its unquestionable acceptance of Enlightenment assumptions regarding rationality, progress, and the promise of discovering universal truths.

## **Teaching is a Changing Profession**

Teaching is a changing profession .The public wants teachers to change: administrators are endlessly exhorting teachers to change; and government is constantly imposing changes on teachers. The work of teachers is already changing owing to the dramatic changes in the world in which they work. These changes are described in terms like post-industrialism, post-liberalism, and post modernity. This changing social world characterized by economic flexibility, technological complexity, cultural and religious diversity, moral and scientific uncertainty, and national insecurity.

Frank Coffield and Bill Williamson believes that colleges and universities' futures in democratic societies are "inseparable from those of the societies they serve and that universities will be diminished, even damaged, if they ignore the widening gulf between different sections of society". Universities advance knowledge are places in which people are made aware of moral situations of their disciplines, are led to question the terms of life offered by their societies and those that have prepared themselves. They argue that the "new language from industry" must be challenged; otherwise a very different role for universities will be fashioned which will undermine their legitimate role in exploring different options for the future (Coffield and Williamson, 1997).

## Thoughts on Postmodernism

Much literature on postmodernism concentrates on Lyotard's full definition of postmodernism "as incredulity towards meta-narratives" that is, on rejecting belief in meta-narratives, the grand universals that legitimize the assumptions of modernism. The postmodern perspective offers concepts, insights, and ways of viewing our current situation, using vocabulary that illuminates profound changes confronting universities and colleges and their place in post modern society.

Postmodernism is not simply a body of thought, a way of theorizing, but also a way of practicing. "Educational practice has many of the features that could properly be called postmodern even though educational practitioners might be reluctant to recognize this" (Usher and Edwards, 1994). There are problems, however, with attempting to relate postmodernism to education. McEwen (1999) argues that the postmodern discourse is one of liberating education from the vestiges of a Nineteenth Century mass disciplinarian ethos and from the reproduction of class and cultural identities. Such liberation would lead to greater community control that would benefit from differentiation and increased flexibility. However, he reflects carefully on the downside, which would mean that the disadvantaged would be the least able to compete in the market and some universities and colleges would find themselves at the bottom end of the market with students for whom there is no place to go.

Hargreaves (1994) argues that education should reflect the effects upon it of postmodern economies, which are distinguished by a vast range of more flexible work technologies and their subsequent impacts on the process of labor. This increased flexibility is supposed to create more meaningful and holistic work for the individual. A major consequence of these more flexible economies is the impact on the teaching of necessary knowledge and skills. More flexible patterns of work and structures for the teaching profession will be required as a result. One effect has been reflected in the global imposition of centralized control of curriculum and assessment requirements. In considering the destinations towards which change has been carrying society, Toffler (1983) states that change is the only constant. He argues that humanity is facing a quantum leap forward that would involve it in the most profound upheaval and social restructuring of all time. Fullan (1993) reflects the work of Kuhn (1970) when he suggests that this quantum leap will be a "paradigm breakthrough" in management, thinking, and response to change.

Pascale (1990) maintains that within education, productive change roams somewhere between over-control and chaos. The velocity and implications of educational reform have been considered by many writers (Fullan, 1991, 1993; Bennett *et al.*, 1992;

Whitaker, 1993; Stoll and Fink, 1996; Hughes, 1996) who have all suggested that, over the past number of years the education system has been experiencing a radical and unprecedented program of reform.

It is a widely accepted generalization that the major engines of change in a global world are knowledge and information. Universities and colleges play a dominant role in the development and dissemination of knowledge, and they are viewed as crucial for the development of economic globalism (Corey and Rhoten, 2002). Thus, education and the

creation of new knowledge are of primary importance to national governments, transnational corporations, and international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. Such institutions want to use higher education to aid in the development of the world economy. For transnational organizations, the purposes of education are to educate efficient and knowledgeable work forces and to generate science research capabilities that will result in marketable technology products. The global institutions become interested in educational standards, assessment, accreditation, and planning, as they seek to bend national educational systems to fit their conceptions of what will help make those systems more efficient and productive. They seek external accountability controls to assure that their versions of quality will prevail. Corporations view the autonomy of higher education, which features tenure and the free exchange of scientific and technical knowledge, as problems for their purposes. Higher education independence may be incompatible with the high level of control that many transnational organizations prefer.

### **The Search for the Truth**

The postmodern vocabulary can be helpful in interpreting the dynamism of science and technology in their impact on higher education. It is the modernist belief that sciences is the primary means for bringing coherence to the search for truth (Usher and Edwards, 1994). Higher education lives and operates within modernist meta-narratives; it is legitimated by science, and it plays a central role in legitimating science. As the emancipating instrument that eliminates superstition and myths about nature, science has more legitimacy than other kinds of knowledge in higher education, and it provides the basis for organizing branches of knowledge into hierarchically arranged disciplines. Science perspectives and scientific methods have acted as a glue holding higher education together. With its success, science has provided a standard with which other disciplines could be compared and has been instrumental in creating a status hierarchy generally recognized across disciplines. Higher education has benefited greatly from its relation to science. Colleges and universities are infused with the scientific ethos, and they partake in the prestige associated with science as a meta-narrative. Doubts cast upon science spills over to higher education and threaten the status educational institutions. But the problem is deep.

### **Distinction between Science and Technology**

In the postmodernism era, the distinction between science and technology is blurred so that determining where science ends and technology begins is not certain. They are especially powerful in the development of the knowledge society, the economic global society, and the warfare society. Colleges and universities have a long history of developing and transferring the scientific and technological fruits of research to corporations and governments. The postmodernism world is replete with multiple

sites for knowledge creation, thereby threatening the role of higher education as the central source for knowledge production.

An important use of the postmodern perspective is to focus on the way science and technology are situated in society, culture, and the economy. In postmodern society, science and technology become more visibly entrenched in all aspects of contemporary life. The strength and soundness of science and technology are not in question, and we cannot escape their influence on our lives. But their very success and importance renders their activities increasingly centered on politically explosive issues. Questions need to be asked regularly concerning their place in our social, political, economic, and cultural life. It has become clear that what we name scientific progress, with its positive contributions to medicine, transportation, and information, is accompanied by an underside that poses serious threats to our everyday lives and to the nation. In the modern era, science has been viewed as an independent enterprise, with its own successful rules, purposes, assumptions, and methods that have allowed it to stand apart, at least by its own reckoning, from other aspects of society. The scientific enterprise operated on the assumption that it was neutral and objective, and this belief in the neutrality of science has been a part of the reason the state has allowed universities and colleges a considerable measure of independence. This concept have been fostered by universities and colleges, giving the impression that science is not influenced by politics economics, or culture. However, in the postmodern age, incredulity toward scientific claims to neutrality and objectivity is increasingly apparent. Foucault (1979) presents a compelling line of argument that underscores doubts concerning objectivity in science. He introduced the notion that power and knowledge are always connected, and his perspective on the connection between power and knowledge means that scientific claims to be objective and neutral are inherently also assertions of power.

### **Major Questions and Changes**

For colleges and universities, the malleable self and identity shifts create major questions concerning what higher education should be about. The modernist higher education tasks of educating for citizenship, preparation for jobs, and growth and development of the individuals become more ambiguous and uncertain. For what should institutions be preparing students in the postmodern era? We are already telling students, they should prepare for a lifetime of shifting jobs, constant learning, and precarious health and retirement benefits. Should we also to be educating people to test different identities and conceptions of self? On the level of teaching/learning, trust in quality assurance becomes less solid, if, particularly through the Internet, it is less possible to assume the legitimacy of the teachers, teaching material, and the organizations that offer them. In addition, does it make any difference if those delivering education are not able to tell the identity of those taught, or if the identity changes during delivery? Perhaps not, but a certain level of uncomfortable instability does seems to arise in these circumstances.

Given the extraordinary, rapid changes taking place in the world, we become aware that we are entering a new and unfamiliar world in which higher education's

form and place in society in undergoing far-reaching, unpredictable changes. We are no longer certain what role higher education will or should play in the new millennium. As Bill Readings writes, “the wider social role of the University is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within society, nor what the exact nature of that society” (Readings, 1996).

### **Post-Modern Era**

What does characterize institutions of higher education in the post-modern era? To understand this, it is useful to look at some of the basic roles institutions of higher education have played in the modern era and to assess what place colleges and universities occupy in the post-modern epoch, bearing in mind that pre-modern, modern, and postmodern characteristics will all be simultaneously evident in the postmodern era. In the modernist era, there is a sense that the aims of colleges and universities were limited and generally understood: teaching; conducting research; training professionals; promoting civic virtue, cultural transmission, and economic development. There is an assumption that teachers, students, and administrators are involved in an enterprise in which common beliefs are held about what the institution is doing. There was an assumption that high quality scholarship was recognizable across disciplines and was to be rewarded in whatever disciplines were offered.

Higher education operated under the auspices of the nation-state in the modern era. The nation-state subsidized and protected higher education, while allowing colleges and universities considerable autonomy. In turn, higher education provided scientific and technological services to the society and served an important role in continuing the cultural tradition of nation (Delanty, 2001). The University supplied credentials for a middle-class work force and socialized students for citizenship in the nation-state.

Modernist higher education has been the central engine for knowledge production and dissemination in society. Colleges and universities have enjoyed a near monopoly in this regard. That monopoly had a highly important characteristic that was scarcely noticed or commented upon in the modernist era. Knowledge creation and dissemination as well as a large measure of consumption, existed primarily in specific physical locations, that is, on campuses of institutions of higher education.

### **Knowledge is Global**

In sharp contrast, knowledge production and distribution in the post-modern era have moved far beyond the boundaries of the university, seriously challenging modernist higher education's control of knowledge. Because of technological and economic changes in postmodern times, particularly the growth of the Internet and the onset of market globalism, knowledge is found, created, and used in a wide variety of sites. That is, knowledge is now produced, distributed, and consumed in many different physical sites, not just in universities and colleges but in television, the Internet, corporations, think tanks, government bureaus, and consultancies. Knowledge is globally dispersed as well, with few geographic locations without the means for

creating, disseminating, and consuming the world's knowledge. The ubiquity of knowledge is such that we now plausibly recognize that we are dwelling in a knowledge society (Delanty, 2001). It is unsettling to see the boundary between knowledge in the university and knowledge in the society being erased.

Knowledge is lodged everywhere means higher education is rapidly losing its knowledge monopoly. It means that consumers of knowledge outside of universities and colleges are in a much stronger position to question and select just what knowledge will be important and used. The widespread scattering of knowledge is viewed by Gibbons et al. as socially distributed knowledge (Gibbons, 1994). The dispersion of knowledge generates special problems for professions whose power to attract fees and prestige is dependent on monopolies of knowledge.

At the same time that higher education is losing its knowledge monopoly, technological and economic forces negatively influence the state's ability or its willingness to provide protection for institutions of higher education. With knowledge production no longer monopolized by higher education, "the role of the university is in crisis: the ivory tower collapsing" (Delanty, 2001).

### **Fractionalization Happening**

Part of the modernization process in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in universities and colleges has been the development of knowledge specialization controlled primarily by professors and contained within the borders of academic disciplines. However, serious fragmentation is now occurring in higher education. This is most noticeable in the constant breakup of disciplines into ever more specialized entities and in the creation of new disciplines. The fractionalization has been happening since the mid-nineteenth century and has increased in recent years.

An important positive result of specialization has been phenomenal growth in knowledge and its application in all fields of research associated with higher education.

However, such fragmentation has eroded any sense of unified purpose if institutions. The high levels of fragmentation allows persons to wander off into isolated academic communities that need not communicate with or try to understand others or attempt to assimilate new knowledge beyond their specialties. Fragmentation also affects the ways in which knowledge is delivered. Education is increasingly disseminated in bits and pieces with little regards for unity and purposes of colleges and universities. In this rich diversity, it becomes more difficult to identify the nature of the professorship. The traditional concept of the professor as a full-time, tenure-track teacher and researcher describes a diminishing percentage of those who deliver higher education.

### **Part-time teachers – Full-time Researchers**

Part-time teachers, full-time researchers, professors who spend much of their time researching or teaching companies that have primary purposes other than higher education, instructors in for-profit educational companies, instructors as conduits for curricula produced by for profit companies: all are evidence of a fragmentation

of the professorship. Yvonna Lincoln has observed that just as personal identity is under great stress and fragmenting, universities find themselves “torn between multiple missions, multiple responsibilities, multiple demands, and hence, open to multiple criticisms “ (Lincoln, 1998, p.2),

### **Power of Knowledge**

The increase in the power of knowledge consumers, derived from their ability to tap into unlimited source of knowledge, means that users of knowledge can now produce, disseminate, and consume knowledge without relying on universities to define what knowledge is important. Thus, knowledge users are encouraged to raise doubts about and to question foundational assumptions of modernism.

Jean Baudrillard originated several of the most helpful terms for tracking the postmodern condition in society and in higher education. His concepts of implosion, hyper-reality, and simulacra identify major disruption and changes in the postmodern era (Baudrillard, 1994). In postmodern contradictory fashion, at the same time that the disciplines are fragmenting through uncontrolled specialization, the boundaries of the disciplines are imploding (Delanty, 2001). Academics do not stay within the confines of their own disciplines but explore the core subjects of other disciplines.

### **Characteristics of a New Millennium**

For those specifically interested in higher education, there is widespread agreement that the driving forces of change are deeply affecting postsecondary education, creating dangerous fragmentation, dissolution of community, loss of direction and unified purpose, attenuation of autonomy, super-competitiveness, and unprecedented implosions dissolving walls between universities, business, and government. Other characteristics of the new millennium that affect everyone and spill over into university life and structure include an openness that provides an almost endless number of options for institutions and individuals, rising levels of skepticism, increase in risk and risk awareness, contested social and personal issues, and questions about constructed selves and newly emerged identities.

To survive and continue to contribute to society, colleges and universities must both adapt to and participate in the transforming postmodern world. Social theorists who speak directly to the condition of colleges and universities view higher education’s future in pessimistic or optimistic terms.

### **The University’s Response**

*The Postmodern Condition*, at what he called “a very postmodern moment



that finds the University nearing what may be its end” (Lyotard, 1984). Lyotard views this ending as based on the university’s response to society’s demand for performativity and on the increasing fragmentation of knowledge that leaves the university with no concept of or any possibility for unity.

Baudrillard’s concept of implosion, when applied to colleges and universities, elicits images of higher education’s dissolved boundaries with corporations and governments and of erased borders between professors as experts and their students. Both kinds of implosions imply serious incursion threatening institutional and professional autonomy. Perhaps no other postmodern term covers more ground or is as reflective of conditions in the new millennium than Baudrillard’s word implosion. Implosion here refers to boundary collapse, a process that occurs in a variety of forms, sites, and circumstances, with both positive and negative consequences. Examples of boundary collapses that affect higher education in the postmodern era include implosion of disciplines and professional-client/student/consumer relations.

### **Demystification of the Disciplines**

A consequence of this type of implosion is a demystification of the disciplines. That is, if any scholar from any field can invade the field of any discipline, scholars are likely to increase their criticisms of each other’s field. This perhaps is most striking already in some scientific fields as they are studied by other scholarly areas. However, without the formal coursework, training in research methods, and grounding in a discipline’s vocabulary and definition of significant research areas, the work of disciplinary outsiders can be accused of producing trivial research, lacking in quality and significance in the eyes of members of the discipline. Nevertheless, contribution from non-disciplinary researchers can bring interesting innovation and new perspectives to a field of inquiry.

### **Access to Unlimited Information**

In the professions, the client/consumer with access to unlimited information can seriously challenge the authority of the degreed professional, potentially creating a free-for-all that could undermine the whole structure of credentials that colleges and universities have traditionally provided. In higher education, we already have the knowledge that at least one generation of professors learned how to use computers from their students. With unlimited information at their fingertips, students are also in a very much better position to call into question the knowledge authority of professors. This is not a negative in that learning from students has always been a positive aspect of teaching for professors. What is not so positive is the understanding we have that information is not knowledge. These issues are central to status and credentialing and raise serious questions in postmodern world about the quality in universities, professions, business, and government. Implosions, de-disciplinary processes, and fragmentation from increasing specialization all attest to a disjointed, diverse,

postmodern higher education universe in which reliance on the meta-narrative of science to repair the disunity is less feasible.

### **Far Reaching Interpretation – Super Complexity**

A persuasive and far-reaching interpretation of conditions in the new millennium is that of Robert Barnett (2000), a professed modernist who nevertheless subscribes to the notion that we live in a postmodern world. His view of a quite troublesome future for higher education describes an environment of not only complexity but also super-complexity. Complexity refers to overloads of information, forces, and data that cannot be absorbed as increasing loads of input continue to arrive (Barnett, 2001). Super-complexity is of a different order referring to “the frameworks of meaning that are available by which individuals might understand themselves, these frameworks multiply and expand, and jar and contend with each other (Barnett, 2001).

The problem with the complexity theory is that it assumes that if we only had enough information, we could, in principle at least, decipher the grand design and act to solve our problems. Barnett argues that no amount of information would bridge the yawning gaps among the incommensurable frames of reference we face, so complexity theory provides a false hope. He also finds chaos theory unrealistically optimistic in its assumption that within the randomness of chaos there might be discerned patterns that can be understood and that can form the basis for rational decision making (Barnett, 2000). Barnett asserts that there are simply too many frameworks of meaning extant and coming into existence for us to understand what they mean and how they relate to each other (Barnett, 2001).

### **The Postmodern World**

Some social theorists with pessimistic descriptions of the postmodern world nevertheless offers hope and recommendations for higher education might both adapt to and influence the environment they exist in, while retaining some measure of autonomy. Readings wrote a book on higher education with the pessimistic title *The University in Ruins*. However, he offers a role for the university that takes advantage of the current fragmentation and provides a “community of dissensus” (Readings, 1996), “a space in which it is possible to think the notion of community without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication” (Readings, 1996). He hasten to note that his approach is not the same as Gerald Graff’s project to promote the teaching of conflicts (Graff, 1987), for that perspective looks forward to reaching consensus, and Readings argues that potential closure is a search for an ideal community and would not keep constantly before us the question of how to be together.

Delantye also posits a university that takes advantage of fragmentation. Asserting that the university will be the major site for the inevitable battles over contested knowledge claims, he contends that higher education would do well to embrace this role. Delantye worries that the diffusion of knowledge, combined with the tendency

of the media to dumb down public debate, has diminished the significance of the public sphere. He writes "rather than seeking the unity of culture, a consensus based community of communication, the point is to institutionalize dissensus and make the university a site of public debate, thus reversing the decline of the public sphere" (Delanty, (2001).

### **Metaphysics – Epistemology – Human Value**

Any intellectual movement is defined by its fundamental philosophical premises. These premises states what it takes to be real, what it is to be human, what is valuable, and how knowledge is acquired. That is, any intellectual movement has metaphysics, a conception of human nature and values, and an epistemology.

**Metaphysics:** Postmodernism is anti-realist, meaning no one can speak meaningfully about an independently existing reality. Postmodernism substitutes language for reality ("social-linguistic constructions").

**Epistemology:** Postmodernism states that reason or "any other method" cannot acquire objective knowledge of reality. Subjective creations of consciousness must become accepted by others as knowledge.

**Human Value:** Postmodernism claims that individual identities come from "social-linguistic" groups, varying according to the influences of sex, race, and ethnicity.

Postmodernist insights require a major shift in our conception of inquiry. We are a "working understanding" of reality and life, one which suits our purposes. And because purposes and context vary from individual to individual and from group to group, what we arrive at is in part our "personal narrative" in the world. Inquiry must be approached "pragmatically". We should not insist that reality, including human nature, take a certain form but rather accept what emerges.

The purpose of this article was to discuss the impact of postmodernism on the concept and practice of teaching, especially at the level of higher education. In addition, the essay addressed the development of creative strategies for implementing postmodern thinking for university administrators to improve colleges and universities in the United States.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, higher education institutions in the United States are undergoing a set of major changes. Some of these changes bring institutions of higher education into challenging relationships with players in their wider environment---state, students as consumers, the world of work and amid competition and marketing , other institutions of higher education. Other changes, partly as a consequence if the first set, set

challenges for the university internally: managing and leading sets of large autonomous staff; balancing pull of disciplines and institutional interest; the rights of students and academic identities. If colleges and universities are becoming more like businesses, or are becoming businesses, if professorship is fragmenting and its work disbursed to a number of other sites managing risk and uncertainty becomes a major task.

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